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# ★★ EXTRA! EXTRA! ★★ READ ALL ABOUT IT!

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## Tapping Students' Popular Culture Interests Through an Elementary School Newspaper

BY ANDREW HUDDLESTON

I must admit being more than a little nervous, the first time I turned them loose. I was a first year, sixth-grade teacher at an elementary school in Texas. My students and I were working on the first issue of our school newspaper, the *Whirlwind News*. I had given them their newspaper assignments and explained what types of information they might need to get in order to return to the classroom and begin writing their news stories. Of course, we had talked about the importance of being respectful and responsible, working with other teachers so as not to disturb their classrooms any more than absolutely necessary. Yet, I found myself unable to stall any longer and was forced to turn them loose. I distinctly remember thinking, "This isn't how a 'normal' classroom operates. After all, this is an elementary school. Shouldn't everybody be in a straight line? And, to take such a risk with sixth graders, was I crazy?" I walked out of my classroom and turned the corner, half expecting to see complete turmoil. What I saw instead both surprised me and delighted me. My students, clipboards in hand, were highly engaged interviewing, copying down direct quotes, and snapping digital photos.

Dewey (1938/1963; 1900/1943) was one of the early advocates for increased hands-on learning in school. He noted how the Industrial Revolution profoundly affected the way in which children were educated. Earlier, when family life was centered around the home on the farm, children were apprenticed by their parents in the numerous necessities of daily living such as sewing, cooking, and farming. However, as families began seeking jobs in the city, children were sent to school where they often were provided with an abstract curriculum with few meaningful applications to everyday life. Dewey (1900/1943) argued that education must undergo a Copernican Revolution of sorts in which the children become the center of education rather than an irrelevant curriculum. Such a change was essential, Dewey believed, to prepare

This article examines one teacher's experiences sponsoring an elementary school newspaper, the *Whirlwind News*. The school newspaper provided a means by which the teacher incorporated the student-centered, project-based instruction advocated by educational theorists such as John Dewey. Although the political climate in which the teacher taught focused largely on standards and high-stakes testing, the *Whirlwind News* served as a venue for authentic literacy, tapping students' popular culture interests. The logistics of funding and creating the newspaper are briefly described, and several students' examples of everyday literacies are examined. The relationships formed through students exploring and sharing their interests created a welcoming environment where both personal and academic growth could occur.

students with the deep knowledge and practical skills necessary for an industrial society. Teachers should seek out students' interests and direct those into meaningful learning projects. Dewey (1900/1943) did warn, however, that such meaningful projects might not be highly disciplined and orderly, at least in the traditional sense. In fact, he described a scene that gives the word discipline an entirely new meaning, a scene quite similar to my experience with the *Whirlwind News*:

There is little of one sort of order where things are in process of construction; there is a certain disorder in any busy workshop; there is not silence; persons are not engaged in maintaining certain fixed physical postures; their arms are not folded; they are not holding their books thus and so. They are doing a variety of things, and there is the confusion, the bustle, that results from activity. But out of the occupation, out of doing things that are to produce results, and out of doing these in a social and co-operative way, there is born a discipline of its own kind and type. (p. 17)

As a first-year teacher, I desperately wanted to implement many of the concepts I had learned about in graduate school. Along with Dewey (1900/1943;

1938/1963), I had read several of the great "heavy-weights" of education such as Goodman (1986) and Smith (1988). I had become fascinated by the possibility of incorporating students' popular culture interests into the classroom (Alvermann, Moon, & Hagood, 1999). My graduate program had focused on a holistic view of reading that was highly student centered. Effective literacy instruction was one in which students actively engaged in authentic literacy activities. Rather than constant skill-based worksheets and contrived reading passages, student engagement with high-quality literature and real-life problems was encouraged.

However, I was fully aware that incorporating such student-centered strategies could prove challenging (Costigan, 2008; Costigan & Crocco, 2004). Texas schools, much like Georgia schools, were mandated to focus primarily on standards and high-stakes testing. Assessing students with standardized tests to identify deficits and fill gaps often resulted in a curriculum-centered education. How could I possibly incorporate the strategies I had learned in graduate school as a teacher in such a standards-based, testing-centered climate?

In this paper, my purpose is to show how sponsoring a school newspaper did in fact help me achieve several of my student-centered objectives. The *Whirlwind News* provided an opportunity to engage students in an authentic literacy activity and to tap into some of their popular culture interests. By tapping these interests, I was able to encourage my students' personal growth, expanding their excitement and interests in popular culture, as well as their academic growth as effective readers, writers, and thinkers.

### **The *Whirlwind News* as Authentic Literacy Instruction**

The *Whirlwind News*, named by the sixth graders after our school mascot, was in its third year when I started teaching at my elementary school. What impressed me most about the *Whirlwind News* was how it was created just like a real-life newspaper. The paper was funded entirely through advertisements students sold to local businesses. Students contacted businesses and family members to encourage them to purchase an ad. Many students were excited and a little nervous about calling an actual business, but it turned out to be a highly-effective way to practice their public speaking skills. Each year my students sold between \$800-\$1000 in advertisements. This was more than enough to cover the costs of printing all six issues we produced. We printed 500 copies of each issue in order to provide papers for all the students and teachers at

the school and any businesses who had purchased advertisements. Any profit we earned, we used to purchase various class and newspaper supplies.

At the end of each six weeks, I assigned students specific newspaper jobs. Students would then go throughout the school collecting information. Before sending the students on their way, we would review the basics of good newswriting such as answering the 5Ws (who, what, when, where, why), using the inverted-pyramid style of writing, double-checking spellings of names, and correctly forming direct quotations. Once students collected the information they needed to write their stories, they would begin writing.

When all of the stories had been typed and edited, and needed photos had been taken, we were ready to begin the layout process. The layout process basically consisted of printing the stories, photos, and advertisements and pasting them onto large layout sheets. Sometimes a photo or news story would need to be resized on the computer and printed again so that everything would fit. When all eight pages were completed, I would deliver them to a local printing company, and within a couple of days, they were ready to be passed out to the students and teachers at our school.

Perhaps the most striking evidences of the authenticity of this project were the challenges we experienced. One year the printing company we used went bankrupt. Another year our district reconfigured grade levels and moved sixth grade to middle school. Luckily, I was moved to a fifth grade position at my school, and the fifth graders were eager to take over the project. As energy prices increased, we faced inflated printing prices and had to sell more advertisements to cover our printing costs. My last year teaching we received news from the printing company that all papers would need to be created electronically and emailed to them in the form of a PDF document. This forced us to learn how to create a template within our word processing document and lay out the paper electronically. All of these challenges were crises that businesses face on a daily basis. For our class, they provided excellent learning opportunities.

### **Popular Culture in the *Whirlwind News***

Although a significant portion of the *Whirlwind News* was devoted to the current events occurring throughout the various grade levels of our school, I soon realized that the newspaper provided a useful format for tapping students' popular culture interests. Popular culture is a challenging concept to define. Alvermann and Xu (2003) and de Certeau (1980/1984) define popular culture broadly as everyday culture and

literacies. This definition rejects the distinction between high and low culture and the notion that popular culture is something children should avoid. It is this broad definition of popular culture that I will use to describe the everyday literacies my students incorporated into their writing for the *Whirlwind News*.

The *Whirlwind News* offered snapshots of students' popular culture interests through recurring sections each six weeks. Student Spotlight stories were always among the most favorite stories students wrote. Each Student Spotlight story provided important information about students, such as their dream career, favorite singer, and favorite movie. Some students dreamed of being a veterinarian, others a professional football player. Favorite singers included everyone from Willy Nelson to Miley Cyrus, and movies varied from Doctor and Silverman's (2001) *Monster Inc.* to Jackson's (2001) *Lord of the Rings*. The Student Spotlight stories provided an engaging and interactive opportunity to highlight students' everyday culture interests. Also, students wrote book reviews for the *Whirlwind News* that provided glimpses into their popular culture interests. Many of the books were fantasies such as Rowling's (1998) *Harry Potter*, Snicket's (1999) *A Series of Unfortunate Events: The Bad Beginning*, and Colfer's (2001) *Artemis Fowl*.

Another component of the *Whirlwind News* that allowed students to share popular culture interests was the Whirlwind Contest. The Whirlwind Contest came in many different forms each six weeks. Often it was a wordsearch or puzzle designed around a theme the students would choose. Students throughout the school would complete the puzzles and turn them in to our class for a chance to win a prize. Many students from all grade levels participated in the contest, which provided an interactive component for the newspaper. Popular themes students selected for the Whirlwind Contests included Hillenburg's (1997) *Sponge Bob*, Raimi's (2002) *Spider-Man*, sports, name-brand tennis shoes, famous musicians, and professional wrestling. A final recurring section of the *Whirlwind News* that provided a venue for students' popular culture was the Creative Corner. The Creative Corner routinely appeared on page seven of the newspaper and was a place where students from all grades could publish poems, stories, and drawings. Students interested in publishing in the Creative Corner would submit their work each six weeks, and the students and I would select three or four of our favorite items to print. The entries submitted to the Creative Corner represented a wide range of popular culture. Often we received drawings of various cartoon characters, cars, cheerleaders, animals, and rap artists.

### **Tapping Students' Popular Culture Interests**

Occasionally a student would independently pursue an interest in a particular topic, often relating in some way to popular culture, and ask me about publishing the project in the *Whirlwind News*. These opportunities offered unique glimpses into my students' interests and provided engaging reading material for the newspaper. Such experiences allowed me to learn more about my students and develop a more personal relationship with them.

#### **Dustin**

One of these students was Dustin (all names are pseudonyms). Dustin was one of those students whose reputation preceded him, but not for positive reasons. He was known throughout the school as being a smart, but challenging, student. It was my first year of teaching and before school even started, I had heard numerous stories about his past behavior. The fifth grade teacher had come by my room and told me that Dustin was going to be a student I would never forget. I was not sure what this meant exactly, but needless to say, when at open house a couple of days before school Dustin walked into my room, I was nervous. Dustin had come with his mother and grandmother, and right off, they noticed a reading corral in the corner of my classroom. This was a small corral I had built from the weathered wood of an old barn my parents had taken down. Inside the corral I had placed an antique bathtub with cushions and the saddle I had used as a young boy, giving students a unique and comfortable place to read. As it turned out, Dustin and his family were quite passionate about cowboy history and culture. His mother and grandmother were actively involved in a cowboy symposium that was held locally each year. They told me that the cowboy symposium offered a youth cowboy poetry contest. I had recently heard about this contest and had already planned on beginning the year with a cowboy history project as a way of sharing some of my interests and encouraging the class to be thinking about their interests as well. Seeing this as a golden opportunity to engage Dustin's interest, I asked him if he would like to write a cowboy poem for the contest.

I left open house that night feeling very encouraged to have made such a strong connection with Dustin and his family. Early that school year, we read lots of books about cowboy life and cowboy poetry and even took a class field trip to the cowboy symposium. All the students had an opportunity to try writing a cowboy poem of their own, and any who wished to submit their poems to the contest were encouraged to do so. Dustin wrote the following cowboy poem that was

awarded first place by the symposium judges. We printed his poem, written from the perspective of a young, wild mustang, on the front page of the *Whirlwind News*:

The Not So Wild Mustang  
By Dustin

Everyday the mustangs love to run wild;  
But not me, no, I'm the rebellious child.  
My mother tells me to stay away from man,  
But I would be happy to help if I can.

It seems there is something in the wind  
That tells me he could be my friend.  
My mother tells me to run and play;  
But that's not how I want to spend my day.

I want to help round up a cow.  
I know that cow-hand could teach me how.  
The others all think that I'm plumb crazy;  
But I think they're just being lazy.

They think it's better being free.  
I'd like a friend to take care of me.

They think ranch life would be a cage.  
I'd like to help that cow-hand earn his wage.

That new cow-hand, his name is Tim.  
I would love to work with him.  
He's caught the brunt of many jokes,  
But they're really not such bad folks.

Hey! What's that? I heard a noise!  
Oh, look! Here come those cowboys.  
The others are trying to run away,  
But as for me, I'm gonna stay!

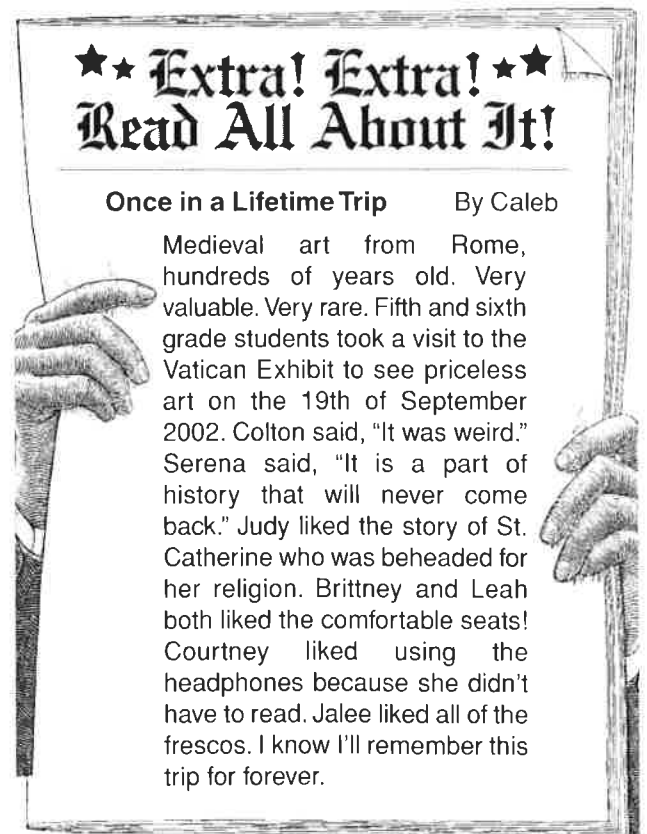
It's over now. We've all been roped.  
It ended just the way I hoped.  
All that talk about being free,  
Now they'll be cow ponies just like me.

Certainly this was a victory for Dustin. Winning first place earned him a belt buckle and an opportunity to read his poem aloud at the cowboy symposium. Perhaps even greater than that was that this shared interest of ours allowed us to get to know and understand each other better. Although there were still challenges, it helped us establish a relationship of learning and respect that resulted in a successful school year for both of us. The fifth grade teacher was right. I will never forget Dustin.

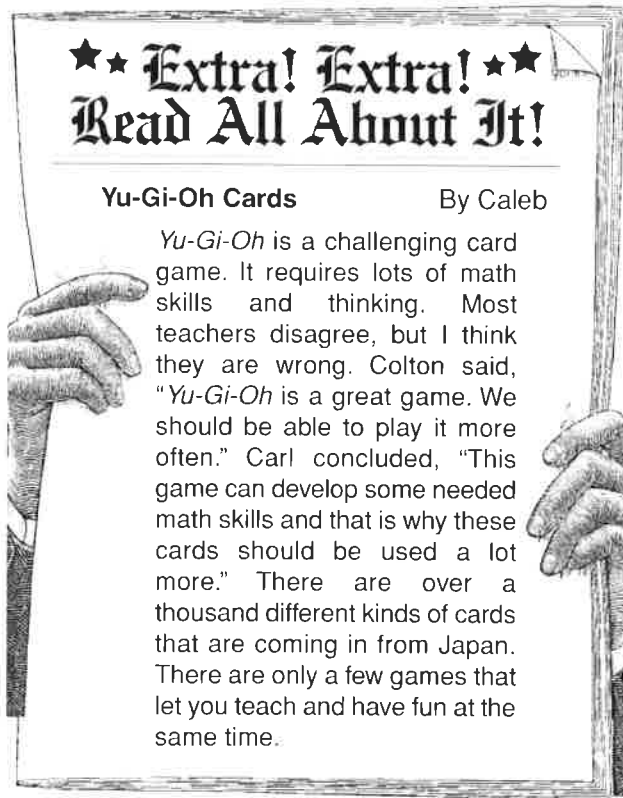
### Caleb

Caleb was an extremely bright student who struggled a great deal with organization. He was quite adept at completing assignments. However, finding those assignments and getting them turned in was an entirely different story. Other times, though fully capable, he would find the routine subjects of school extremely boring and engage in all types of mischievous behavior aimed at disrupting the other students. What I quickly learned about Caleb was that he had a passion for reading nonfiction, especially when reading it on his own terms. He begged and pleaded to sit at the desk nearest our class set of encyclopedias, and I allowed it. Caleb spent numerous days during our independent reading time consuming various volumes from the encyclopedias. I was always amazed by Caleb's ability to get stuck on a volume and read it cover to cover, much like a novel. In fact, he even used a bookmark to keep track of his daily progress.

Caleb developed a love for history, especially the Middle Ages. He was never shy about sharing what he had read, often telling the class about various facts he had learned. Needless to say, when Caleb heard that a special, medieval art exhibit from Rome was coming to town and that we were going to visit it, he was ecstatic. Caleb talked about that fieldtrip all year long, and everyone agreed that he should be the one to write about it in the *Whirlwind News*.



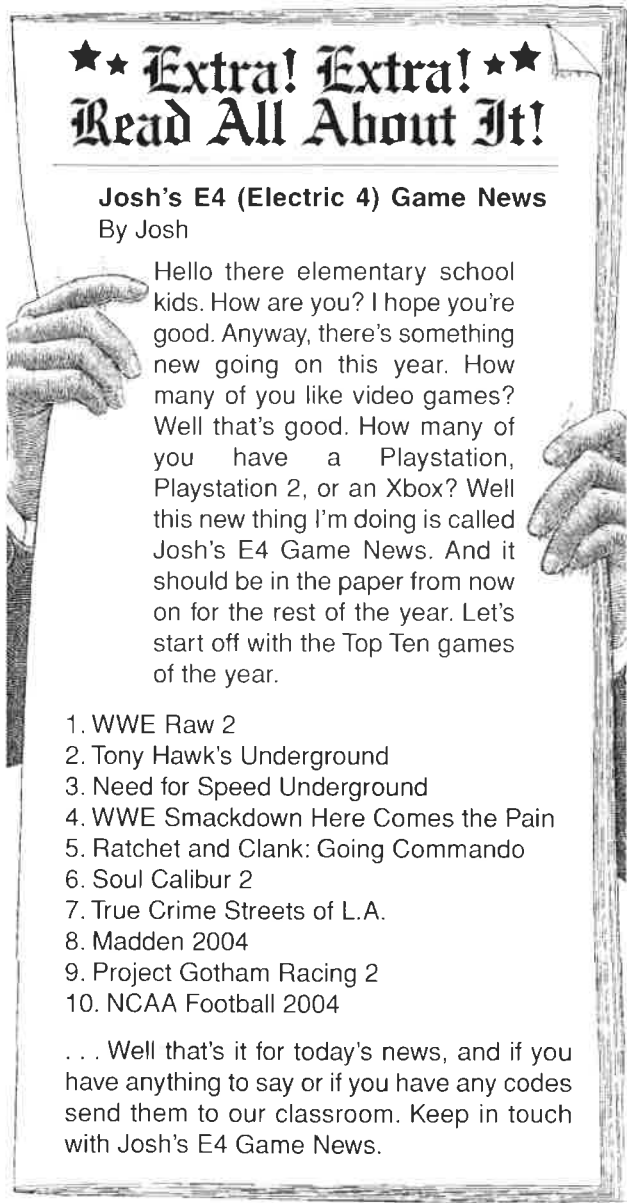
Many of my students, including Caleb, were very interested in Takahashi's (2003) *Yu-Gi-Oh!*. In addition to their interests in the books and television shows, several students enjoyed the *Yu-Gi-Oh!* playing cards. Some of them wrote news stories in the *Whirlwind News* describing how to collect and duel with the cards. Although many students attempted to bring them to school, they were often quickly taken up by teachers. This of course aggravated my students, some of whom thought there was a good deal of reading and math involved in playing with the cards. A few students even published editorials in the paper, trying to convince teachers that they should be allowed to have them at school. Caleb was one of these students. Although he fully admitted the pleasure involved in dueling with *Yu-Gi-Oh!* cards, he also explained how they could be educational.



**Josh**

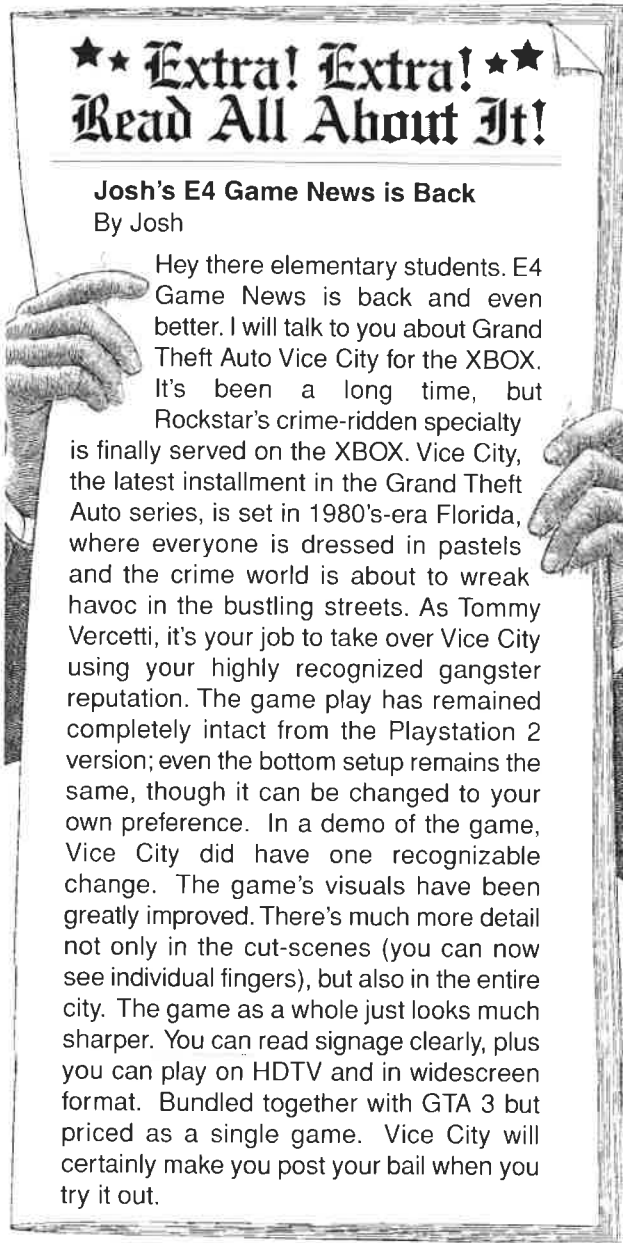
Josh was a very capable student who never seemed to be highly engaged in class. He completed his assignments and would participate when called on, yet his overall motivation and engagement never seemed to be what it could have been. One day though, about half way through the school year, Josh approached me with an original idea. He asked if he could begin writing a column each six weeks for the *Whirlwind News* about video games. The articles would discuss students' favorite video games and offer advice and

codes for playing them. We had never had a recurring columnist in the *Whirlwind News* before. Seeing this as an opportunity to engage Josh in writing about one of his passions, I agreed to let Josh write his column. Here is a portion of his first article:



Unfortunately, Josh got into some trouble later that year and had to spend a few weeks at an alternative school. In a meeting concerning Josh, his father discussed how important writing the column had been for him. Josh had asked to take extra copies of the paper home and had given them to special friends and relatives. His article was certainly something he was proud of. It also provided a leadership role for Josh in our school. Students were depending on him to provide his video game expertise in each issue. I strongly encouraged Josh to get back to our school as

quickly as possible because we needed him to write his articles. Josh did return and was able to continue his column at the end of the year.



### **Faith**

About midway through my last year of teaching, a student came to our school from Swaziland. Faith had just arrived to the United States to live with her father and stepmother. She was a couple of years older than most of my students, but her parents and my principal felt that fifth grade would be a good placement for her because she had missed some school while living with her mother and grandmother in Swaziland.

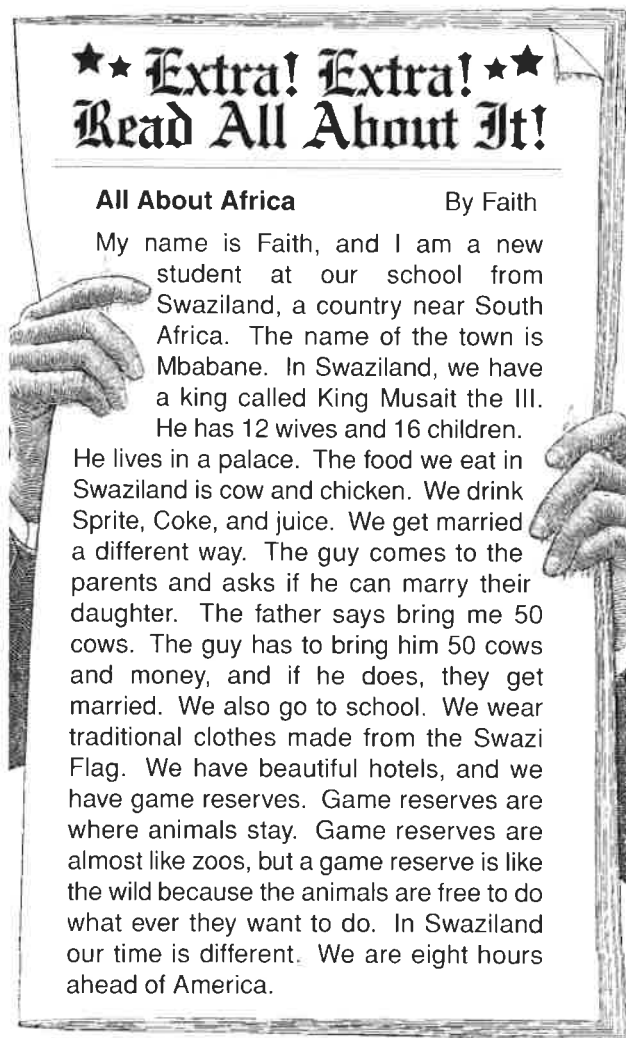
Unfortunately, Faith's first day of school in the United States just so happened to be the day our school

district was giving one of the State's released standardized tests for benchmarking purposes. I felt that this was somewhat of a rough initiation into the American education system, but on the other hand, it did provide me with some insight into her skills for completing a standardized reading test. Faith only got half of the questions correct. Knowing that this was the end of November and the first State reading test would be given in March made me uneasy. To make matters more urgent, Faith would be required to pass that test by July in order to be promoted to sixth grade. Much like Georgia, fifth grade in Texas is one of a handful of school years in which students are required to pass the reading and math standardized tests for promotion.

I quickly placed Faith in a small tutoring group after school and spent a great deal of time discussing with her the educational experiences she had in Swaziland. She told me that she had missed some school in Swaziland and that English was one of her classes at school, although she also spoke several other languages. Faith was extremely bright and serious about her education. She enjoyed learning and had a natural talent for public speaking. She had a deep love for her home country and was eager to tell her American classmates about it. Although Faith spoke and wrote well, her English vocabulary was limited. Often she would ask me what certain words meant that I used in class. For example, on one occasion, she stopped me and asked, "Sir, what is an author?" There were other academic areas that she had not yet been exposed to a great deal, one of which was such a strong emphasis on standardized testing.

I felt that the key to helping Faith be successful in school was to immerse her in numerous reading, writing, and speaking opportunities. Her parents, both fluent English speakers, agreed to engage her in a great deal of English conversation at home and assist her with her studies. After Faith brought some photos of her life in Swaziland, I asked if she would be interested in sharing them with the class. She happily agreed, and it resulted in a semester-long research project. Faith eventually gave several lengthy presentations to my class about life in Swaziland. She created a poster-board backdrop in which she pasted photos and facts about Swaziland. She read books and searched the Internet to collect her information. Presenting this information to the class and answering students' questions gave her numerous opportunities to develop her vocabulary. Her reading and writing skills also developed extremely quickly, and it did not take long for her to catch on to the kind of thinking the State was looking for on their standardized tests. Faith

ended up passing the reading test on her first attempt, just a few short months after she arrived in the United States. Her Swaziland research culminated in the following article she wrote for the *Whirlwind News*:



These students whose contributions I have shared, like many of my students, appeared to be struggling with various issues. Some struggled with classroom behavior or a lack of engagement in school, and others struggled to obtain the skills needed to succeed. Also, these students were quite passionate about various forms of everyday culture. Like Alvermann (2008) and Gee (2007), I hoped to gain some insight through their interests in popular culture to more effectively help them in school.

#### **Discussion: Personal and Academic Growth**

Alvermann and Xu (2003) described the current debate concerning if and how popular culture should be used in the classroom. Some teachers completely oppose popular culture use in schools, viewing it as a low form of entertainment that can be harmful to young

children's development. Other teachers do see a place for using popular culture in the classroom, if students are taught how to critically analyze it for commercial and political messages. Still, some teachers argue that a critical approach can ruin the pleasure it provides for children and that teachers should simply celebrate students' interests in it.

By encouraging students to share their popular culture interests in the *Whirlwind News*, I hoped to maintain a balanced approach to incorporating popular culture (Alvermann, Moon, & Hagood, 1999; Alvermann & Xu, 2003). I wanted to spotlight and celebrate students' personal passions for everyday culture. Students chose to bring their popular culture into the school setting, primarily on their own terms and for their own purposes (Hull & Schultz, 2002). As a result, I discovered, much like Marsh (2000) and Arthur (2001), that my students' engagement in school greatly increased. Moreover, the *Whirlwind News* served as an excellent venue for doing this. Its authenticity, it was funded and operated just like a real-life newspaper, seemed to be a natural vehicle for sharing students' everyday literacies.

However, I wanted to do more than simply celebrate my students' personal interests. I wanted my students to develop academically as readers and writers as well. I wanted to teach them that reading and writing are about finding things in life that you are passionate about and that reading and writing can be tools for learning about and sharing those passions. Encouraging my students to read and write about topics of keen interest to them appeared to serve them well in their literacy development. In fact, like Stone (2007) and Merchant (2001), I was amazed by the complexity of the learning they were already engaged in through their popular culture interests. Students were eager to write and publish stories in the *Whirlwind News* that they found interesting and meaningful. Also, writing about their passions for a school-wide audience seemed to increase the time and care they put into their work.

I remember when I first realized that my students were creating a paper, not just for themselves, but for the entire school. It was brought home to me in the late spring when our school offered PONY Day (Preview of Next Year). Each spring on PONY Day, students moved up to the next grade level for one class period to get a glimpse of what to expect the next fall. I would routinely spend some of the time telling students about the *Whirlwind News*. I always enjoyed asking how many of them had been reading the paper. Each year I asked this question, all the students raised their

hands. This was a pleasant reminder to me of the impact my students' writing was having. The *Whirlwind News* offered my students a real reason to write and the entire school a good reason to read.

Although Dewey (1938/1963; 1900/1943) advocated authentic, hands-on learning years ago, his message remains highly relevant and applicable. Students must be engaged in a practical and pertinent curriculum to develop the skills needed to succeed in a rapidly changing society. There is great power and potential to be found in tapping students' interests and guiding them into meaningful learning projects. Dewey (1900/1943) was a strong supporter of tapping students' interests in everyday culture. However, finding students' interests was not enough. He also encouraged teachers to guide and develop students' interests into educational activities as well. Such teaching encouraged me to get to know my students better and become more aware of their interests. For many of my students, valuing and incorporating their interests was key in establishing closer relationships with them, relationships that created a welcoming environment where both personal and academic growth could take place.

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